

Week 9 – COEXIST – Hebrews 12:14-15

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 12:12-17

Introduction

Back in March, 1991, a black man named Rodney King was pulled over by officers of the LAPD after a high-speed chase and, during his subsequent arrest for driving while intoxicated, those officers proceeded to brutally beat Mr. King

An uninvolved individual filmed the incident from his nearby balcony and sent the footage to a local news station where it was aired and picked up by other news stations around the world

Though two of the four officers involved were eventually convicted in federal court of violating Mr. King's civil rights all four officers involved were acquitted of any wrongdoing in county court leading to riots that rocked Los Angeles in 1992

During those riots, Mr. King made a television appearance pleading for an end to them and as he spoke he uttered the phrase he has been known for ever since, "Can we all get along?"

Unlike some of the topics we've looked at in this series where we used the bumper sticker as a metaphor for the shorthand we often employ when describing our beliefs, this morning we will be looking at an actual bumper sticker

In fact, it's one of the most well-known bumper stickers on the planet - one that you have likely encountered many times as you've been out and about - the blue and white COEXIST bumper sticker

While there are many versions of the COEXIST bumper sticker these days, the one I'm showing here is the most universal design where:

C is represented by a crescent moon and star

O is the peace symbol

E is a combination of the universal symbols for male and female

X is the Star of David

I contains a pentagram

S is the Chinese Yin/Yang symbol

T is a cross

Each of those symbols stands for a belief system

The crescent, of course, stands for Islam

The peace symbol stands for pacifism or atheism

The male/female symbol can stand for humanism or gender equality depending on who you ask

The Star of David stands for Judaism

The pentagram is a Wiccan or pagan symbol

The yin/yang symbol symbolizes Taoism

And, of course, the Cross stands for Christianity

Those who see the COEXIST bumper sticker have myriad views on it

Those views range from seeing it as a positive message of tolerance and peace to a negative message conveying spiritual universalism to a neutral message that is actually quite meaningless

After all, the definition of the word "coexist" literally means "to exist at the same time"

And, since we know all of the ideas represented on the bumper sticker do indeed exist in our world today, one must read something more into the bumper sticker for it to have any real meaning

And it's there where we can get into trouble

So this morning we will begin by looking at the origin of the bumper sticker and the implied meaning behind it

I. Origin and Meaning

The COEXIST image was first conceived by a Polish poster designer named Jan Mlodozieniec for an Israeli art contest in the year 2000

The original artwork was significantly different from the popular image we know today as it was black and white and only had the Islamic crescent, the Star of David, and the Christian Cross leaving the O, E, I, and S as actual letters

Over time and after quite a bit of legal wrangling, an Islamic entrepreneur named Tarek Elgawhary licensed the rights to use the original image for his Coexist Foundation and another designer based the bumper sticker we know today on it

In an interview, Elgawhary stated that the bumper sticker means whatever a person wants it to mean and anyone can acceptably add their own meaning to the bumper sticker and the foundation will adopt that meaning

I suppose that's being true to the concept of coexisting if nothing else

I think we're safe in saying that most people, when they see or display the COEXIST sticker, read it as a reflection of our culture and the pluralistic worldview that dominates it

Let's face it; "tolerance" has been the watchword of our culture for some time

And when we look at the dictionary definition of "tolerance" which is "the endurance of the presence or actions of objectionable persons, or of the expression of offensive positions" I would have to say tolerance is a good stance to take

If all that was intended by the ideas of "COEXIST" and "tolerance" was that we should be willing to adopt a live and let live attitude and let others do their own thing that seems like something we could embrace - in that qualified sense

After all, **Romans 12:18** tells us, *"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."*

And **Matthew 22:39** tells us the second great commandment is to *"love your neighbor as yourself"*

But that's not all that the bumper sticker conveys and I believe most people understand it to imply a whole lot more than merely "everyone should live together peacefully"

Because "tolerance" today also has to include endorsing or even embracing and celebrating the thing you used to merely tolerate and to even hint that the thing is wrong earns you the "intolerant" label

And for the Christ-follower that means you had dare not share your faith with someone who believes differently

I was rather surprised to read a quote from a 2013 article published in the leftist, online magazine *Vice* that said, "On the surface [COEXIST] seems like a sentiment I should agree with...But what happens when you put anything on a bumper sticker is that you remove the suggestive tone and make it a command..."

And what the bumper sticker is demanding is that everyone accept all people of all different religions, along with the non-religious, and to recognize that no one religion is more right or true than any of the others

And most people understand the message of the bumper sticker to be saying that all religious paths lead eventually to the same outcome – that everyone will wind up the same in the end

The cynic in me looks at the bumper sticker and imagines that its purveyors are really saying that adherence to religion in any form is irrational

That it really doesn't matter what religion you follow because none of them amount to anything so we might as well all get along

And since the majority of people who display the COEXIST sticker tend to be more on the liberal/secular end of the spectrum I'm pretty sure that's the message a fair number of them mean to convey

And I'm sure there are plenty of people who receive that message

But others look at the bumper sticker in a more positive way that says basically, “All roads lead to heaven”

That’s the heresy known as universalism - that everyone will be saved and spend eternity with God in the end

And many people, even many Christians, believe the idea of universal salvation

Some hold to that position because they simply can’t abide the thought that multitudes of their fellow human being will spend eternity apart from God in hell – that thought is just too much for them to bear

Others overemphasize God’s attributes of love and mercy as they neglect to account for God’s holiness, righteousness, and justice

But there are problems with universalism

II. The Problems with Universalism

For one, the Bible simply doesn’t support it

The Bible clearly teaches that those who are unredeemed will spend eternity in torment in hell

Look with me at **Matthew 25:46** where Jesus himself teaches the eternal dwelling place for both the redeemed and the unredeemed

And looking up a few verses to **Matthew 25:41** we see that the idea that some have that the dead simply cease to exist when they die is unfounded as Jesus describes the torment of the unsaved as “eternal fire” showing conscious existence and experience after death

Jesus teaches the same truth in **Mark 9:48** as well where he says the torment of the unsaved dead is forever

Rob Bell, former pastor of Mars Hill church introduced universalism to a whole generation with his book *Love Wins*

But he is simply wrong when he states in his book that “hell is not forever”

The plain, biblical truth is that those who are unredeemed when they die spend eternity in hell

Still, because of his love and mercy, God provided the way to avoid that eternal punishment when he sent his Son, Jesus to die on the cross for us as **John 3:16** tells us

And I say “*the*” way because Jesus claims to be the singular door that leads to an eternity with God in heaven

Jesus said, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” [**John 14:6**]

Then we read in **Acts 4:12**, “*there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*”

And **1Timothy 2:5-6** informs us, “*there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all*”

Now, look with me at **John 3:18** to see the consequence of the decision to accept or reject Jesus –

Whoever believes in him [Jesus] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And verse 36 [**John 3:36**] –

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

Christianity makes very specific and exclusionary claims doesn’t it?

The claims we’ve just looked at exclude all other religions and you cannot believe in universalism if you believe the Bible is God’s Word

Universalism has another problem though - it makes no logical sense

When you look just at the original three religions that were included by the design's originator: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity you see straight away that they are incompatible with one another

They each make claims that the others contradict and if one is right; the others have to be wrong so that all roads can't lead to heaven

Remember a contradiction is when you say that both "X" and "not X" are true at the same time

By way of example, Christianity is very clear in saying that Jesus is the second member of the triune Godhead, the Son of God, and, as such, that Jesus is fully divine

But Judaism and Islam simply do not recognize the divinity of Jesus

The Islamic faith teaches that Jesus was a human prophet and a forerunner to the final prophet, Mohamed

They teach that God allowed Jesus to do miracles to prove his prophethood but that he wasn't divine and didn't die on the cross

Judaism, like Islam, views the concept of the Trinity as polytheism and that it is heretical for any man to claim to be God

And they teach that Jesus is not the Messiah but only that he claimed to be

There is no way to reconcile those three belief systems because they can't all be true at the same time - they are contradictory

Jesus is either the fully divine Son of God or he is not - both propositions cannot be true

Jesus is either Messiah or not - both can't be true

Jesus is either the only way to be reconciled to God or he is not - both can't be true

And the contradictions only multiply exponentially when you add in the remaining symbols and the belief systems they represent because they are pagan and even satanic contradictions to the other faiths

So if COEXIST means anything more than the classical definition of things that exist at the same time, the sticker is illogical and an impossible wish because the beliefs cannot COEXIST in the sense that they can all be accepted as true

But, as I stated earlier, I fear the real message behind the bumper sticker is that we should cast off religion all together which if you drill down into it is itself a violation of the COEXIST ideal

For example, Christianity says that homosexuality is wrong so someone who is a Christian is likely to say that living a homosexual lifestyle is a sin against God and shouldn't be done

Someone who disagrees with that is going to deride the Christian for living out his worldview and chastise them for imposing their beliefs onto others and say that they should learn to coexist with the practicing homosexuals

In other words, they should give up their beliefs in order to "coexist" with those who think differently leading not to the coexistence of opposing viewpoints but the existence of only one viewpoint that is at least tolerant of homosexuality

So what should the response of the Christ-follower be to the COEXIST bumper sticker - let's examine the proper stance we should have to it

III. The Proper Stance

First of all, the Christ-follower is called to coexist in this world with the others who inhabit it

It is God's will that we coexist with people who believe differently than we do - in the classical sense of coexistence

Otherwise, God would simply take us to be with him the moment we are saved

Still, we aren't called to coexist the way the world defines coexistence

We are not called to compromise in matters of faith - just the opposite

As **Colossians 2:8** tells us we are to –

See to it that no one takes [us] captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

We are to put on the whole armor of God and stand firm and keep alert with all perseverance as we read in **Ephesians 6**

While we must coexist with people who believe other than we so, as Christ-followers, our duty is to show the world the truth of God's Word by our testimonies and actions

Actually, we are not called to merely exist at all - God has given our lives purpose

In a general sense, God created all mankind so that all might know him and enjoy him

But God has always had a special purpose for his people

In **Isaiah 43:10**, God told his people, Israel,

You are my witnesses," declares the Lord, "and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.

And he has extended that purpose to his church today by giving us the Great Commission of making disciples found in **Matthew 28:19-20** and in Jesus' instructions found in **Acts 1:8** to carry on with the work he began

Those are our marching orders and when we obey them we are sure to violate the ethos of COEXIST because Christianity is based on an exclusive claim of salvation through Christ alone and there can be no compromise

And we know that God has also prepared other good works for us to do as we read in **Ephesians 2:10**

And those good works extend beyond our fellow Christ-followers to those around us as we read in **Galatians 6:10**

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Also in **Luke 6:27-28** where Jesus commanded –

But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

In fact, we are called to do everything we do for God and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ [**Colossians 3:17**]

And **Matthew 5:16** tells us that unbelievers may well notice what we do and give God the glory

It took us a while but we finally got to our focus verses for today - look with me again at **Hebrews 12:14-15** because in them we see the balance that we need to strike as we carry out our purpose

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled

Remember, that the letter to the Hebrews was written at a time when the recipients were experiencing persecution at the hands of those who surrounded them and held different beliefs

In the words, "strive for peace with everyone" we see Paul's sentiment from Romans 12:18 don't we?

There is a call for us to get along as best we can with those around us

While we need to contend for the truth we aren't to be mean-spirited or haughty about it

We are to walk in such a way that we can have relationships, so that we can coexist as it were, with all people so that we might be able to talk to them about God and their need of the Savior

As it says in **Psalm 37:3** we are to *trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.*

But we are also to pursue holiness as we see stated next in our passage from Hebrews and that means walking right before God

God expects us to live in this world without becoming a part of this world as sheep among wolves -as set-apart people

It's our job to introduce people to the grace of God so that all who will might have a chance to accept it

And we are to live so as to give as little offense as possible so that people won't be turned off and turn away from us and the message we bring

Look with me at **1Peter 3:15-16** which fleshes out this idea –

But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

Conclusion

COEXIST is a winsome sentiment because it just seems so tolerant and nice

But at its root it's evil as it seeks to destroy all religion and Christianity especially and sacrifice them on the altars of pluralism and universalism

I ran across a survey that was conducted by the Christian publisher Lifeway that I found rather chilling and I'm going to close by relating what it revealed

In that survey it was revealed that close to a fourth of pastors don't have a firm grasp on the biblical truth that eternal life cannot be obtained outside of Christ

The actual question from the survey was: "If a person is sincerely seeking God he/she can obtain eternal life through religions other than Christianity"

And only 77 percent of pastors strongly disagreed with that statement

With that kind of shepherding, it shouldn't be too surprising, although it is heartbreaking, that only 48 percent of regular church attenders strongly disagreed

COEXIST and the ideals behind it appear to be taking a toll on the truth in many churches

Jesus said, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

And while we coexist on this earth with others who believe differently that must be our message as we strive for peace with everyone

Let's pray

Hebrews 12:12-17 (Page 1009)

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, [13](#)and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. [14](#)Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. [15](#)See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; [16](#)that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. [17](#)For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.